



Michigan Teen Conference aims to prep those in foster care for their future

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on June 18, 2014 at 10:14 AM, updated June 20, 2014 at 11:40 AM

GRAND RAPIDS, MI – Of the more than 13,000 Michigan children in foster care, 25 percent of those who don't go home or aren't adopted will go to jail within two years of being on their own, foster care advocates say.

Lacking parental figures to learn from hurts their future. A program this week by Lutheran Social Services of Michigan is trying to improve their chances of success.



LSSM will host the **14th annual Michigan**

Teen Conference starting Wednesday, June 18, at Ferris State University. The two-day program consists of workshops and networking opportunities for teens and young adults, ages 14 through 21.

"When I first went, I was really shy but I really enjoyed it and I got a lot out of it," said 22-year-old Sheila VanWert. "I really like the opportunity to bring a bunch of young people together to work together and learn new things and resources."

VanWert first attended the conference in 2007. As a sophomore in high school, she had already been put into foster care after the death of her ill mother, and was adopted into a poor situation with a sexually abusive foster father.

"After that went down, my house life got real bad, so when I graduated at 17, I moved out and was on my own," she said. "I was able to use (the conference) as an escape and to learn different things and it gave me hope for what the future could look like It really helped me through the transition."

The conference teaches participants how to rent an apartment, apply for college and jobs, open a bank account, use social media effectively and manage relationships with birth parents, among other opportunities.

Teens also get the chance to stand up and tell their story to a group with similar backgrounds and realize they aren't alone.

"Year after year, it's amazing to see those kids share those things and experience and talk through them together," said Keith Stump, program manager for the conference. "One of the reasons I became involved is because I've seen the value."

Representatives of the U.S. Army will lead workshops on career awareness and anti-bullying this year.

"Anti-bullying (as a topic) is new," Stump said. "(Foster care teens) absolutely are the minority in school and most places, so yes, they are victims of bullying and just culturally, it's a hot button issue."

The conference has grown since its start in 2000. LSSM had to turn away teens after registration filled up at about 200 attendees this year. Stump said he hopes to move to a larger location on Ferris' campus in 2015 to expand and accept more participants.

VanWert exemplifies the benefits of the program, having come out of foster care to earn her associate's degree at Delta College and working toward her bachelor's degree at Saginaw Valley State University.

For the second year, she is on the conference's planning board and will lead a workshop. To her, having alumni of the foster care system speak about their success post -foster care is encouraging.

Her advice to foster teens: Continue your education and take advantage of available resources like the conference.

"I feel like every young person who has come through foster care should go to college because education is the No. 1 factor for breaking your family's cycle," VanWert said. "In life, there are things you have no control over. At that point, you have to decide how to go forward."

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